

1 of 1 DOCUMENT

St. Petersburg Times (Florida)

February 13, 2002, Wednesday, 0 South Pinellas Edition

State criticizes private program for foster kids

BYLINE: CURTIS KRUEGER

SECTION: CITY & STATE; Pg. 1B

LENGTH: 570 words

Billed as a solution to the state's perpetually troubled social services agency, a private organization in Pinellas and Pasco counties is supposed to make life safer for foster children.

But the workers are swamped.

Staff at the Family Continuity Program, hired two years ago to work with foster children and abused kids, is "consistently working 50- to 60-hour weeks" without overtime, according to a state Department of Children and Families report.

One manager was working with 70 families, when the optimum is 20, and supervising employees at the same time. The effect has been a lack of documentation in client files, the report said, something that could result in serious consequences.

But Jeff Richard, executive director of Family Continuity, said the problem should be solved soon. He said new employees are gaining the experience needed to ease the load on more experienced employees.

"Every day that goes by it gets better and soon, over the next couple of months, we'll really be ahead of the curve," he said.

The troubles cited in the report have a familiar ring for the Department of Children and Families, formerly called HRS. When children have died under the department's supervision, later investigations often have turned up a troubling pattern of overworked staff, poorly maintained case files, and crucial information that leaked through

holes in the system.

But this time, the DCF is making the criticism instead of taking it.

"Definitely, they need to remedy some of their issues," said DCF spokeswoman Shawwna Lee.

Fed up with the controversies surrounding the department, the Florida Legislature in 1998 voted to require the state to privatize divisions that work with foster children, children who go up for adoption, and the counselors of parents who have abused or neglected their children. Gov. Jeb Bush and DCF Secretary Kathleen Kearney have enthusiastically embraced the concept.

Pinellas and Pasco counties were among the first to privatize, hiring Family Continuity to begin work in July 2000.

But the transition grew rocky because Family Continuity needed to hire many new employees. Once hired, the workers could not take on large caseloads because state rules require that new caseworkers begin gradually, handling as few as two families at a time. More experienced staffers had to take on extra cases.

Richard said workers now are averaging roughly 30 cases per person.

When his agency first took over, he said, "we worried about making sure when we did such a massive system change that no child fell through the cracks." Now, he said, he considers the transition behind him. "We feel increasingly better."

Sixteen Family Continuity workers were interviewed for the DCF report. Workers gave the agency high marks for encouraging creativity and teamwork and making them feel valued.

But they also said the long hours "are still not sufficient for them to complete all necessary administrative duties," the report said.

Noting a lack of documentation in some files, the report concluded: "It was not apparent that staff

State criticizes private program for foster kids St. Petersburg Times (Florida) February 13, 2002, Wednesday,
0 South Pinellas Edition

understand the serious consequences that could result when administrative processes are not followed."

The report also questioned Family Continuity's decision not to pay its workers overtime. Richard said he had received legal opinions assuring him it was proper.

- Times Staff Writer Ryan Davis contributed to this report.

PERSON: JEFF RICHARD (69%);

ORGANIZATION: DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN&FAMILIES (94%); FAMILY CONTINUITY (91%);

COUNTRY: UNITED STATES (79%);

STATE: FLORIDA, USA (79%);

COMPANY: DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN&FAMILIES (94%); FAMILY CONTINUITY (91%);

SUBJECT: CHILDREN (91%); CHILD WELFARE (90%); FOSTER CARE (90%); FAMILY SERVICES (90%); FAMILY (90%); RECRUITMENT & HIRING (89%); PRIVATIZATION (78%); US STATE GOVERNMENT (78%); WORK WEEK (77%); OVERTIME (77%); CHILD ABUSE (77%); INVESTIGATIONS (76%); LEGISLATORS (76%); L BODIES (73%);

LOAD-DATE: February 13, 2002

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

GRAPHIC: PHOTO; DCF Secretary Kathleen Kearney